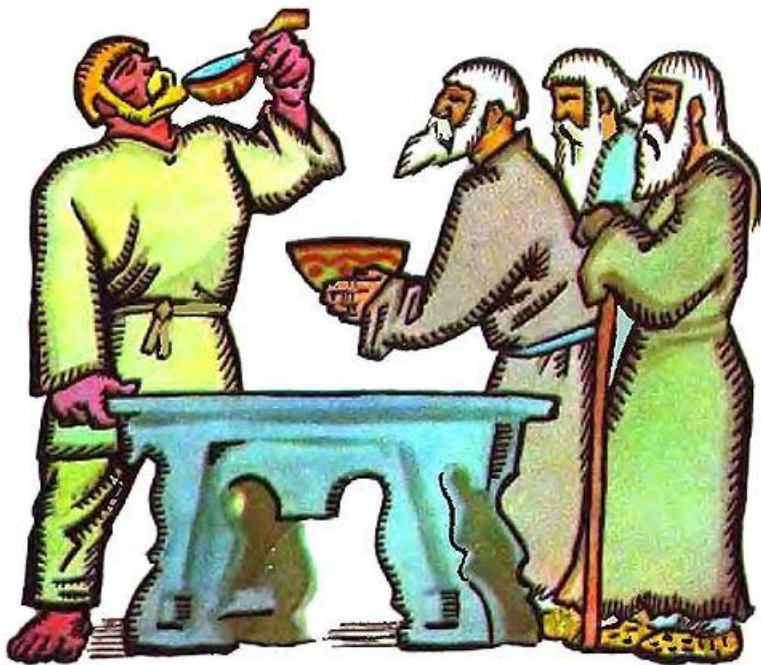


Ukrainian Folk Tale



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ILLYA OF MUROM AND SOLOVEI THE WHISTLER-ROBBER



Illya of Murom was born near the town of Murom into a family of poor peasants. His father and mother chopped wood in the forest for a living and farmed a small plot of land and they fed Illya who had weak legs and could not walk. For thirty years he lay on the stove without getting up and did no work.

One day, when he was thirty years of age and lying on the stove as usual and his father and mother were away at work, three old men came up to their house.

"Open the door, Illya!" they called.

"I cannot!" Illya called back. "My legs are weak and I dare not get up."

"You can do it if you try, Illya. Come, get up!"

Illya tried hard. He pulled and strained, and, swinging his legs over the side of the stove, leapt down onto the floor. Then, walking easily across the room, he opened the door and let in the old men.

"You have been very ill, Illya, but you are well now," the old men said. "Rejoice and let your father and mother rejoice with you, for you will always be healthy and strong like a true bohatyr brave warrior!"

They held out a jug of water to him and said again:

"Here, drink this water and a change will come over you. There... How strong do you feel?"

"Very strong."

"That is good. Drink some more!"

Illya lifted the jug to his lips and took a long drink.

"Well, do you feel any stronger now?"

"Yes! I feel so strong that if a ring were to be driven into the earth and I were to take hold of it, I could turn the earth upside down!"

"Good! Very good! And now listen, Illya. You must not boast of your strength or tell anyone about it but do only that which will please your father and mother. Harm none but do good to all."

Now, this was a time when Rus was overrun by the Tatars, and Illya of Murom decided to come to his country's defense. Kazan had been besieged, with three tsars, bohatyrs all three, leading the enemy host, and it was thither he hastened. He approached the town, and, pulling an oak tree up by the roots, began smiting the Tatars with it, and he struck down all but a few of them. Of the whole enemy host only the three tsars were still on their feet, and Illya came up to them and said:

"Go back whence you came and tell your people never to cross our borders again. I only left you alive in order that you might do so. Rus has Illya of Murom defending her, and he is a great bohatyr whom none can vanquish."

The Tatar tsars went back to their own land, and Illya of Murom rode into Kazan. The streets were empty, for the townsfolk had sought shelter in their homes and in the churches. Illya entered a church and found it full of people who were praying and weeping.

"What are you doing here, good folk?" he asked.

"Cannot you see for yourself!" said they. "The Tatars are at our gates and there is not a man or a woman among us who is not in danger of being slain."

"Speak you of Tatars? But there are none anywhere near. Go and see for yourselves!"

They went outside, and lo! — the Tatars were indeed gone and it was as though they had never been.

After that there was much rejoicing and merrymaking, and the townsfolk thanked Illya of Murom and begged him to stay with them.

But Illya said:

"Nay, that I cannot do! I delivered Kazan from the Tatars, and now I must haste to other towns and free them too. Fear nothing, for no foe will come to bother you again. Live as you lived before and be at peace!"

And Illya of Murom got on his horse and made for Kiev.

Now, all who went there took a roundabout way as the regular road was blocked by Solovei the Whistler-Robber who slew all who came near: not a bird could fly, not a beast could run, not a bohatyr could ride past him. But Illya of Murom took the road that led straight to Kiev and so had to pass the forest where Solovei lay in wait. On three oaks he sat and nine branches in a nest he had built for himself and from which he could see over the whole of the forest. And the moment he spied anyone he would whistle like a bird and roar like a beast, and the leaves would rain from the trees, the trees crash to the ground, and all who happened to be passing by drop dead.

Illya of Murom came riding past the forest, and Solovei the Whistler-Robber saw him and whistled like a bird, and the leaves rained down from the trees; he roared like a beast, and Illya's horse stumbled and fell onto its knees.

But Illya of Murom drove his knee into the horse's flank and cried:

"A horse of mine to fear Solovei the Whistler-Robber? Up now or I'll give you to the dogs!"

The horse stood up, and Illya rode on. He was close now to where Solovei the Whistler-Robber was waiting, and, seeing him, Solovei leapt down to the ground and made for him. But Illya of Murom took aim and sent an arrow straight into Solovei's right eye. The arrow pierced Solovei's head and came out from the back of it, and Solovei fell to the ground. Illya sprang up to him, and, seizing him, held him in his grip, and Solovei knew Illya for one stronger than he and told himself that his end had come.

Illya untied the stirrups from his saddle, and, binding the Whistler-Robber's arms and legs with strong leather thongs, tied him to it, sprang on the horse's back and made for Solovei's house.

Now, Solovei the Whistler-Robber had a daughter who was as strong as any bohatyr, and when this daughter saw Illya of Murom come riding up, with her father hanging from his saddle, she seized an iron bar weighing all of ninety poods and hurled it at him. But Illya of Murom stopped the bar with his shoulder and sent it flying back and it struck Solovei's daughter and killed her on the spot.

Solovei's wife came out, and, seeing that her husband's life was in danger, began to plead with Illya, begging him to spare Solovei and promising to pay him as large a ransom in either gold or silver as he wanted.

But Illya of Murom would have none of it.

"Nay, Solovei has lived long enough!" he said. "Never would I spare one who killed and orphaned so many! And I want none of your gold. It is not riches I covet — I seek to defend the wronged and helpless!"

And turning round his horse, he headed for Kiev.

Now, it was Prince Volodimir who reigned in Kiev at the time, and when Illya of Murom arrived the Prince was holding a feast at which all his bohatyrs had gathered.

Illya told the Prince who he was, and the Prince asked him by what road he had travelled.

"By the road that runs straight to Kiev, Prince," Illya said.

At this all the bohatyrs sprang up from their seats, and one who was more famed than any, Alyosha, Son of a Priest, said:

"He lies, Prince, it cannot be! For who can travel by the road that runs straight to Kiev, with Solovei the Whistler-Robber lying in wait there and not a bird being able to fly nor a beast to run past him!"

"Do you then call yourself a true bohatyr, you who fear Solovei the Whistler-Robber?" said Illya of Murom. "Let me show you where Solovei is!"

He led the Prince, his wife and the bohatyrs into the courtyard and pointed at the Whistler-Robber.

"There he is!" he said.

They looked, and, seeing Solovei dangling from the saddle, knew Illya of Murom to be a true bohatyr, for who but a true bohatyr could have vanquished such a one!

Prince Volodimir said not a word to Illya, but addressed Solovei.

"Come, Solovei, whistle like a bird and roar like a beast!" he said.

But Solovei the Whistler-Robber only sneered.



"It was not you who took me captive and it is not for you to tell me what to do!" he said.

The Prince turned to Illya of Murom.

"Bid him do as I said!" said he.

Said Illya of Murom:

"Come, Prince, and you, Princess, stand beside me, and I will throw my cape over you that your ear-drums might not burst when Solovei whistles."

He threw his cape over them and turned to Solovei.

"Hark now, Solovei, do as I bid and whistle like a bird!" he cried.

Solovei whistled like a bird, and lo! — the leaves rained from the trees, and Prince Volodimir's bohatyrs fell to the ground and began crawling across the courtyard on all fours in their fright.

Then Solovei roared like a beast, and they stumbled and fell and were so dazed that they knew not where to go. But Prince Volodimir and his Princess were safe under Illya of Murom's cape.

"And is this how brave you are, my gallants!" said Illya of Murom to the Prince's bohatyrs. "Why did I not fly from Solovei as you do!"

He led Solovei the Whistler-Robber out into the field and cut off his head. And now that Solovei was dead, he stayed with the Prince and lived in his palace.

One day the bohatyrs again came to visit the Prince. They spent the time in revelry, and they quarreled with Illya and so set the Prince against him that he threw him into a dungeon. He had an earthen wall put up around it, and, thinking to starve Illya to death, sent him no food for three years. But the Prince's daughter brought him food and drink in secret from her father, and though the Prince thought him dead, Illya

was alive and well.

Three years passed, and a Tatar tsar, Kalin by name, who was famed for his prowess in battle, sent a messenger to Prince Volodimir with a letter for him in which he wrote as follows:

"Kalin, Tsar of the Tatars, writes you this. Of my own lands I have not enough and wish to add your Kiev lands to them. Should you refuse to surrender Kiev I shall lead my host against you and seize it, and you and the Princess shall work in my kitchens."

Prince Volodimir read the letter and turned white with fear. He spoke to his wife, but as they could not think what to do they called their daughter and asked her counsel.

"Send for Illya of Murom. Perhaps he is still alive," the daughter said.

"You must be out of your senses, daughter!" said the Prince. "Illya has been kept in a dungeon without food for three years. So not only is he long dead by now but his bones have long turned to dust."

"Send for him all the same, Father!"

The Prince was vexed by this and said so, but the daughter said again:

"But, Father, what if he is still alive?"

Seeing her so insistent, the Prince argued no more.

"Very well, I'll send someone there to see."

He sent his men to the dungeon, and they dug a passage in the earthen wall and made their way into it. And lo! — there sat Illya of Murom, alive and well, singing songs to pass the time. The men came back to the Prince.

"Illya of Murom is alive, Prince, and as well as he ever was," said they.

"Speak you truly?" the Prince demanded.

"Aye, Prince."

"Then let us go there at once!"

And the Prince hastened to the dungeon.

He unlocked all the doors, let out Illya of Murom and said to him in pleading tones:

"Be not wroth with me, Illya, for letting my anger get the better of me, help me out in my trouble."

"Nay, Prince, ask not for my help. You kept me here in order to starve me to death!" said Illya.

The Prince went away and sent the Princess, his wife, to talk to Illya, but he would have none of her and all her pleas availed her nothing. Then the Prince's daughter offered to speak to him and went to the dungeon, and when he saw her Illya said:

"You brought me food, maid, and did not let me die, and I will fight for you and defend Rus. Lucky are your father and mother to have such a daughter!"

Out he stepped from the dungeon and went forth to war against Tsar Kalin. He routed Tsar Kalin's host, but Tsar Kalin was a strong man and a true bohatyr and he said that now that his men had fallen in battle he would himself fight Illya of Murom. For three long days they fought, and Tsar Kalin got the better of Illya. He threw him to the ground and held him in an iron grip."

But Tsar Kalin, who had three beautiful daughters, did not mean to kill Illya of Murom but only to frighten him. So he pulled out his dagger and cried: "Beware, for I will cut you to ribbons, Illya of Murom!" And in the next breath: "Nay, live, bohatyr! Take one of my daughters to wife and join forces with me! Leave your princes! Why should you fight for them when they do nothing for you?"

Now, Illya of Murom knew, for so the old men who had cured him of his long illness had told him, that he drew his strength from his native soil and that the longer he lay on the bare earth the stronger he would become. So when Tsar Kalin threw him down and held him pinned to the ground, he was glad, for he felt himself growing stronger. He lay there and waited, and Tsar Kalin, seeing him so calm, was enraged and said:



"Refuse to do as I say, and you will die!"

But Illya made no reply, and it was only when he felt himself to have become strong again, stronger than ever he was, that he caught Tsar Kalin with his legs and hurled him high. Up into the air a full ten metres flew Tsar Kalin and then he fell to the ground and there was little life left in him. And Illya of Murom seized him by the legs and began swinging him round and round, using his body to smite those men of

his who were still alive. And in this way he slew them all.

After that he came back to Kiev, married Prince Volodimir's daughter and lived out his life in peace.